Looking "Outward and Onward" in the Outback: Regional Australian Students' Aspirations and Expectations for their Future as Framed by Dominant Discourses of Further Education and Training

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Abstract

This paper investigates regional Australian students' aspirations and expectations for their future and, more specifically, the manner in which these are formulated around a view to move outward – that is, away from regional, remote and rural communities – and onward – that is, to make something of their lives. Drawing upon interview data, the paper highlights the ways in which rural students from across Australia expressed high-level aspirations, most of which centred on future careers. It explores features of student talk which demonstrates that many of them had thought about their futures in detailed ways and had accumulated knowledge and "street savvy" that would assist them in steering their futures. The paper also examines the ways in which student talk about the changing context of the world of work and the inescapability of further education emerge as a naturalised discourse in justifying their future plans. Finally, the paper explores the implications of such research findings for career advisers and teachers working in regional areas of Australia.

This paper examines regional Australian students' aspirations and expectations for their future. In doing so, it presents the voices of secondary school students; and the webs of discourses and narratives which constitute these voices, and within which their views of the future are formed. The paper looks at the nature of students' aspirations relating to work and careers and the kinds of discourses about education and training that support them – for it is these that constitute the dominant narrative as prevalent in the students' talk. What also becomes apparent – in the talk of regional students in Australia – is that there exist generally buoyant levels of aspirations and expectations.

In exploring these issues, the paper draws upon data collected while undertaking a national research project which examined Australian regional students' aspirations and expectations and the factors that impact upon these (Alloway, Gilbert, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2004). This study was funded by the Federal Government in recognition that rural disadvantage is a major concern for Australia as a nation. It is the case that young people in rural and remote areas are often more vulnerable to the impact of economic restructuring and the education-hungry global economic environment (Kenyon, Sercombe, Black, & Lhuede, 2001), and more vulnerable to shifting demographics and community restructurings of the Australian economy (Ainley & McKenzie, 1999; Spierings, 2001). This vulnerability is compounded by the educational disadvantage young people in regional Australia often experience in access to schools and reasonable curriculum choice, to a stable and capable teaching force, to higher education programmes, to TAFE courses, and to other training programmes, and in the employment and training opportunities available in the move from school to adult life (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, HREOC, 1999, 2000a).

It should also be noted at this point, that the term *regional* – as in line with the DEST contractual agreement – refers to regional, rural and remote areas of Australia and is used in this way in this paper.

A Contextual Framework

Research pertaining to young people's aspirations and expectations has long been on the national and international agenda, and in general terms, such research has focused on their hopes and plans for the future and most notably their educational and employment futures. Such research – as relating to the various factors that are seen to generally affect the formation of aspirations and expectations of young people – has identified the following broad categories: experiences of schooling (Gilbert & Gilbert, 1995; Brookes, Milne, Paterson, Johansson, & Hart, 1997; Trent & Slade, 2001; Alloway, Dalley, Patterson, Walker, & Lenoy, 2004), families (Brookes et al., 1997; Abbott-Chapman, 2000; Mercurio & Clayton, 2001) ethnicity and race (Yunupingu, 1995; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Education Unit, Education Queensland, 1998; Kenyon et al., 2001; Mercurio & Clayton, 2001) gender (Dwyer, Harwood, & Tyler, 1998; Collins, Kenway, & MacLeod, 2000) and socio-economic factors (James, Wyn, Baldwin, Helpworth, Mc Innis, & Stephanou, 1999; Collins et al., 2000). Significantly, Marks, Fleming, Long and McMillan (2000) have also shown that the role of attitudes, motivations and aspirations is just as influential, and their work points to the need for research which considers the narratives young people use when they imagine and aspire to particular futures and pathways – research such as is drawn upon in this paper (see also Dusseldorp Skills Forum, 2006a, 2006b).

While these broad-based factors are likely to impact upon the aspirations and expectations of all young Australians, they interact in particular ways with young people who come from rural locations (see Office of Youth Affairs, 1997; Looker & Dwyer, 1998a; Wyn et al., 1998; HREOC, 1999, 2000b; James et al., 1999; Marks & Fleming, 1999; Collins et al., 2000; Lester, 2000; Kenyon et al., 2001; Kilpatrick, Field & Falk, 2001; Warner-Smith & Lee, 2001; Kilpatrick & Abbott-Chapman, 2002; LSAY, 2002). Further to this is the added complexity of the notion *rural* – for it is not without its own complexities (see Henry, 1998; Looker & Dwyer, 1998a; Western, McMillan, & Durrington, 1998; Wyn, Stokes, & Stafford, 1998). As Looker and Dwyer (1998a, p. 10) note, "rurality is not a constant – it means different things in different social and historical contexts". To assume that all young people who live outside the metropolitan area in Australia experience life similarly is to be misguided – for this is simply not so given the diversity of rural communities, rural clusterings. There is, as such, a need to recognise such diversity; enormous diversity in size, resources, social relationships, economic status and access to services and facilities. So, too, is there a need to recognise that rural people can vary enormously in their occupational engagement, their educational levels, their social attitudes and values, and their aspirations and expectations.

Research on educational aspirations and expectations has also indicated that young people make the transition from their schooling lives to their post-schooling lives in a variety of ways: that the transition to adult life is not necessarily linear or predictable (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Dwyer, Harwood, & Tyler, 1998, 1999; Looker & Dwyer, 1998b; Dwyer, Smith, Tyler, & Wyn, 2003; Harris, Rainey, & Sumner, 2006; Bryce & Anderson, 2008); that many young people do not necessarily aspire to move directly from school to further education or training or employment. Rather, research has indicated the complex mix of work, study and leisure that constitutes young people's lives as they negotiate and navigate their way through a rapidly changing set of social, personal and employment conditions typical of the 21st Century – the "Changing Times" (Wyn, 2004; see also Wyn & Woodman, 2006). Significantly, this marks out a change from traditional post-school trajectories – and is indicative of young people's response to the changing social and economic world within which they now live out their lives; and indeed their lives as lived in – and beyond – rural Australian locales.

Further, research exploring the views of education and the future as held by 16 to 24 year old Australians – the Generation Ys, defined as those born between 1982 and 2003 – reported that, "young people had a strictly instrumentalist view of education" and that "it was there to provide you with the skills and knowledge necessary to get a job, at whatever level suited you" (Dusseldorp, 2006a, p. 7). The research also noted that while young people do "set their minds" to the future, it is the case that "the future they see and hope for, tends to be a very conventional one" (Dusseldorp, p. 7) and

constitutes one that tends to be "centred on getting a reasonable job" (Dusseldorp, pp. 7-8). So, too, in the main, "these goals are seen as entirely achievable, although their timing may be somewhat uncertain" (Dusseldorp, p. 8).

The Dusseldorp (2006a) findings are, in essence, supported by the research of others. Beavis (2006), drawing upon survey data of high school students in Years 11 and 12, found that "vocational interests were shown to be associated with a decision to attend university" and that "the type of university course planned was also associated with vocational interests" (p. 25). Additionally, Patton and Creed's (2007a) research into adolescents' occupational aspirations and expectations has shown such to be a significant influence on both short-term educational and long-term career choices, as well as, a reflection of their future social mobility (see also Schoon & Parsons, 2002; Rojewski, 2005; Patton & Creed, 2007b).

Finally, research suggests that the decision-making processes associated with post-school planning begin from an early age (Alloway, Dalley, Patterson, Walker, & Lenoy, 2004). So, too, research undertaken by Bryce, Anderson, Frigo and McKenzie (2007, p. 33) indicates that many young people seem to have "predispositions to tertiary study from early in secondary school" (see also Bryce & Anderson, 2008). Additionally, Beavis (2006, p. 25) notes in relation to his research findings that, amongst some of the students surveyed, there appeared to be "an increasingly sophisticated understanding of post-school options". This noted, "the career literature recognises that for many young people the years immediately after school are a time where compromise in career aspirations occurs" (Walker, 2006, p. 58; see also Borgen & Amundson, 2000; Isaacson & Brown, 2000; Herr, Cramer, & Niles, 2004).

Methodology

This paper – as signalled previously – draws upon a national research study and, more specifically, the data obtained through a series of focus group interviews conducted with students in 13 different regional communities across Australia. These 13 sites were chosen to produce a mix on the following range of criteria: State coverage (as drawn from all States and Territories, with the exception of the Australian Capital Territory), population size (as ranging from 4800 – 35500), accessibility/remoteness (as per Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia – ARIA) (Department of Health and Aged Care, 2001), settlement type (including remote, inland agricultural, coastal rural and metropolitan) and impact of socio-economic change on sites as distinguishable on a continuum of opportunity to vulnerability (Stimson & Baum, 2001).

The study, upon which this paper draws, began by opening out a multi-voiced project drawing on "inductive strategies instead of starting from theories and testing them" and

accepting that knowledge and practice would be "studied as local knowledge and practice" (Flick, 1998, p. 2). In operationalising the study, qualitative data were collected by a team of experienced researchers drawing on, as noted above, the conventions of focus group interviews. Focus group methodology was chosen because, as argued by Madriz (2000), the group situation potentially reduces "the influence of the interviewer on the research subjects by tilting the balance of power toward the group. Because focus groups emphasize the collective, rather than the individual, they foster free expression of ideas, encouraging the members of the group to speak up" (Denzin, 1986; Frey & Fontana, 1993 as cited in Madriz, 2000, p. 838). The possible limitations of this approach, as with the dilemmas associated with all interviewing methods, were also recognised by the researchers: for example, some participants may be reluctant to speak, others may endeavour to dominant the verbal space, and some participants may seek to please the researchers in terms of the responses they offer.

The view that aspirations and expectations are formed over a considerable period of time was considered, and informed, the creation and composition of interview groups. Two key points for students are at the end of compulsory schooling (Year 10 in most States of Australia), where decisions about continuing to Year 12 crystallise, and the end of Year 12, where participation in work or further or higher education are at issue. As such, students in both year groups (along with other those students in other Year levels) were interviewed, and their views of their past experience and future opportunities elicited.

In communities where numbers and types of schools allowed, student interviews were conducted in two schools to include State and Catholic or Independent schools. Additionally, given that young adults can be influenced by the gender composition of interview (see Gilbert & Gilbert, 1995), it was proposed that a variety of gendered groupings were used in the study. As such, the selection of groups across the sites aimed to produce a balance of all male groups, all female groups and mixed sex groups. Selection of groups also ensured inclusion of Indigenous students. In sites with significant numbers of Indigenous students, additional focus groups interviews were sought with these students.

The range of interviews produced the following overall pattern in the data: 2 boys only groups, 2 girls only groups, 37 mixed groups, 3 indigenous groups, 17 (in total) Year 10 groups and 23 (in total) Year 11-12 groups. Table 1 provides details of the student interviews in terms of school category and interview type. It is to be noted that this research was conducted in the 'real life' context of secondary schools – sites within which research endeavours are constrained by the demands of timetables and teacher and student availability. As such, the range of interviews is representative of convenience sampling.

Site	School Category	Interview Type	
1	State	1 Year 10 mixed	2 Year 11 mixed
2	State	2 Year 10 boys 1 Year 11 mixed	1 Year 10 girls 1 Indigenous group
3	State	1 Year 10 mixed	1 Year 11 mixed
4	State Independent	1 Year 10 mixed 1 Year 10 mixed	1 Year 11 mixed 1 Year 11 mixed
5	State	1 Year 11 mixed	1 Year 13 mixed
6	State Independent	1 Year 11 mixed 1 Year 12 mixed	1 Year 12 mixed 1 Year 11 mixed
7	State (2)	1 Year 12 mixed 2 Year 10 mixed	1 Year 13 mixed
8	State	1 Year 10 mixed 1 Indigenous group	1 Year 12 mixed
9	State	1 Year 10 boys 1 Year 11 mixed	1 Year 10 girls
10	State	1 Year 10 mixed 1 Year 11/12 mixed	1 Year 11 mixed 1 Indigenous group
11	State	1 Year 10 mixed	
12	State	1 Year 10 mixed	1 Year 11 mixed
13	State Independent	1 Year 10 mixed 1 Year 10 mixed	1 Year 12 mixed 1 Year 12 mixed

Table 1: Student Interviews X School Category and Interview Type

The interviews were semi-structured and interactive, with open-ended questions aimed to provide as much scope as possible for respondents to identify significant issues. They were, therefore, flexible and negotiated in the course of the group interaction in each site. Arranged by school personnel and conducted primarily on the school sites, the interviews ranged from approximately 30 minutes in length to over an hour and a half. They were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The analysis involved the conceptual clustering into themes of the emergent data, employing the method of thematic analysis.

Further, it is important to note that the focus groups captured those students who were still at school, at a time when university enrolments were booming, and provide evidence of considerable commitment amongst rural students who stayed on at school. The focus groups did not, however, capture the voices of those who had left school. Nor does this paper focus on what happened to the students, the obstacles they faced in realising their expectations and aspirations, or the experiences they had post-school. And while these issues are outside the scope of the research under discussion here, they are to be noted as important points of investigation for future research work.

Discussion of Results: Navigating Rural Students' Narratives

The most palpable and consistent theme to emerge from the interviews with the students who participated in the study was that the vast majority of them wanted 'to be something' – they wanted to make something of their lives – they did not want to be caught in what they perceived to be dead-end jobs that would rob them of opportunities to explore life in ways that had not been available to many of their parents. Many of the students who were interviewed considered their futures within an implicit framework of Changing Times – of restructured communities and economies, of changing landscapes, and of meta-narratives that had begun to shape and coerce what they imagined and expected of themselves. Features of their talk demonstrated visibly that many students had thought about their futures in detailed ways and that they had accumulated know how and street savvy that would assist them in navigating their futures. Most importantly, when asked about their futures, most students conceptualised their responses in terms of work and careers that appeared to be foremost in their thinking. Further, many seemed well informed about pathways and options, and strategic in their calculations about how to achieve their goals. Essentially, there existed generally buoyant levels of aspirations and expectations – as evident in the students' talk. It was the case that students whose aspirations focused on work and career options represented the dominant voice within the focus groups at every site, at every school visited.

Student aspirations: Work and careers

> I just want to be something – like a label – so I can say, "I do this".
> It makes you seem really cool. (Year 12 Student, South Australia)

The majority of rural students interviewed – from across Australia – expressed high-level aspirations, most of which centred on future careers. To this end, they spoke of their desires and of their plans to continue their studies at Universities and at TAFE colleges and to take up traineeships and apprenticeships within and outside their communities.

In general, students' choices of careers were rich and varied as evidenced in their reports that they wanted to become aeronautical and computer engineers, technology specialists, doctors, lawyers, psychologists, farmers, professional sport stars, television and radio personalities, secretaries, hospitality workers, construction workers and so on. While some students had settled on dedicated career goals, others expressed interest in pursuing varied options.

A recurrent theme that echoed through student voices from across Australia was that they did not want to work, on a long-term basis at least, in low-paid, low-status retail positions. Students generally saw those in the community who worked in such positions as counter-models to their own aspirations. As typified in the following quotation, such students were adamant that they expected more from their lives. And for some, the idea of being bound to mundane jobs was inextricably linked to staying in their rural community:

S: If I'm still here in twenty years, I'll be disappointed.
S: Still here in twenty years I'll be in the graveyard.
S: You just see some people that, you know, have their life based around, like Woolworths and Big W and you just go, 'Oh. I'm never going to be like that'. It's just wrong.
(New South Wales Year 10 Students)

What was striking in many of the interviews was the determination that students expressed in securing long-term work that would sustain their personal goals. Equally striking was the spirit that some students expressed in accepting the competitive nature of the world of work, the need to be flexible in the face of competition, and the value-adding effect of more education and training. For the Indigenous student represented in the following quotation, for example, the value of life-long learning appeared self-evident, and the opportunity to continue training for a longer period of time counted as good luck rather than a chore:

I: And have you just put in for one traineeship?
S: I put in for all of them.
I: How many?
S: Three.
I: And how much training do they give you?
S: About a year. If you're lucky, you'll get two.
I: So you're seeing yourself as continuing?
S: Yeah. Because I don't want to stop, just keep going.
(Western Australia Indigenous Student)

In brief, rural communities, in all their diversity, seemed to accommodate many students whose aspirations and expectations were firmly targeted at furthering their

education and training. For the most part, the desire to continue learning in a variety of forms and forums after completing school appeared to be the norm amongst rural students. As discussed in the following section, talk about transitions from school to work and the necessity for further education and training seemed to have been naturalised in student discourse about their future.

Further education and training as naturalised discourse

While some students were certain of what they wanted to do when they left school, and others vacillated amongst desirable and achievable options, most were quite certain that whatever they wanted to do required that they do well at school and that they progress to further education and training. It is no overstatement to claim from the interviews that the idea of further education and training had taken a firm grip on students' aspirations for their futures. Student talk about the changing context of the world of work and the inescapability of further education and training is recognised here as a naturalised discourse because of the regularity of its use amongst students in justifying their future plans.

In every focus group interview conducted, in every State and in the Northern Territory, students regularly declared the need for further education and training to the point were it appeared to have become a taken-for-granted "fact" related to contemporary times and the realities associated with achieving their aspirations:

S: I think a lot of people our age want to do so much. Like they want to do so much in their lives, all different things. Like I want to go in the air force and be a pilot for a while and I want to go to Uni.
S: I want to travel.
S: Yeah, but definitely have to go to Uni …
S: A lot of people still haven't an idea what they're going to do and they know they want to go on to a higher study such as university, but they don't know where that's going to take them or what's going to happen after that.
S: Half the time you don't even know what you're going to study at Uni. You just sort of want to go.
(New South Wales Independent Year 10 Students)

The naturalness of the discourse drawing on extended study and training was supported strongly in instances were students had seen the model within their families and the discourse had been effectively naturalised by their own family practices. It was also supported in instances were students spoke about taking time off, deferring studies for a time while still accepting the persuasiveness of the argument embedded in the discourse that further study eventually would be necessary:

S: Yeah, I want to come back to school next year. Haven't thought twice about it. I always wanted to go and finish Year 12. After that I'd like to go to University in Brisbane. That's where most of the people, most of the people from my generation from my family tend to go …
S: Yeah, I'm coming back next year. When I finish Year 12, I'll probably leave, take a year off from study. Then hopefully go to Uni in Brisbane.
(Queensland Year 11 Students)

For many students further education and training symbolised the prospect of a life with options; it represented the infrastructure that would support multiple pathways to their desired futures:

S: I'm not sure that everyone wants to leave North-West Tasmania, depending on what they want to do, but most people when they go through Year 12 will get at least that, if not go on to TAFE or University or something else.
S: Education will give you a fairly strong backbone. Once you've got that you can basically do anything.
(Tasmania Year 10 Students)

Students' aspirations and expectations appeared to be underpinned by a clear understanding that education did not cease at Year 10 or Year 12 but that 'to be something' required evidence of further study or training and the ability to demonstrate a competitive edge in gaining a desired position:

S: Without school you don't really have much choice to choose what you want to do really …
S: And also if you're better qualified than the person next to you, you'll probably get the job instead of them.
S: You've got to keep on going to do what you want to do for the rest to your life.
(Queensland Year 10 Boys)

Essentially, in many examples of student talk they came to an agreed conclusion that almost anything that was worth pursuing would require further application to study and training, and adoption of the principle of on-going learning. Most students believed that individual effort involving further education and training would be necessary to achieve their goals, and most seemed to accept this as a fundamental truth of living in the 21st century with its changing social and economic structures. While everyone knew of some community members doing well without qualifications, students generally viewed these cases as exceptions rather than the rule. From most students' perspectives, it was education and training, rather than good fortune or good luck, that would sustain them. The wily student whose voice is heard in the following

quotation was able to resist the resilient story line – sometimes promoted even by teachers – that post-compulsory education may not be necessary in making a fortune:

S: And our careers teacher … said that he had friends that dropped out in Year 10 and now they're millionaires. So you think, "Why am I going to Uni? Why am I planning to go to Uni?" Because it's probably one in about three million that gets to be a millionaire! That's why!
(Victoria Independent Year 12 Student)

Education and training as a means to an end

While the need for post-compulsory education and training was naturalised in student talk about their futures, commitment to further education and training was also represented in instrumental and pragmatic terms, as stipulations of achievable means to desirable ends.

For some students, aspirations were driven by the realisation that the world of work had changed fundamentally and that they now had to take into account the inevitability of a "credentialing creep" in employment prospects:

S: … half the reason all these people want to leave town, I reckon, is because you used to be able to just get a job like that. Now everything is money orientated. You need a degree. You need papers. Even the farmers here now, they find that they have to go away and do an Associate Diploma, or something like that, to enhance their business or their property…
(Queensland Year 10 Student)

For other students, aspirations were driven by pragmatic considerations of how they could escape from what they perceived to be restrictive features within their communities. According to students in varying locations, further education and training represented a 'ticket out of town', without which their horizons would be severely limited. Throughout the focus group interviews, students reiterated the instrumental value of education in allowing them to escape from rural communities where they could see little hope of employment:

S: I'm just here so I can get in to Uni.
S: Yes. Exactly. It's like I always say, it's my free ticket out of [here].
S: And if you don't have your HSC you just, it reduces your options so much.
(New South Wales Independent Year 12 Students)

S: Basically, Uni is your ticket to get out of here. Like if you can get to Uni, you can leave [here], that's basically it I reckon.
(South Australia Year 12 Student)

S: A lot of kids do want to do University. That's because they want to go to University to get out of [here].
(Queensland Year 11 Student)

While commitment to further education and training was often grounded in ideas of escape, it was also born of undisguised aspirations for a higher standard of living, material wealth, and the desire for personal recognition:

S: A lot of people want money too and a better lifestyle.
S: That's what it's all about, money. A good lifestyle. Big house.
S: People want to be famous, or like, it's you just want to be high profile.
(New South Wales Independent Year 11 Students)

A generalised fear amongst students was that if they did not capitalise on the instrumental value of further study and training, if they did not continue to learn and to develop, then they would suffer the fate of their peers who did not ascribe to such principles:

I: And what of those who choose not to go on?
S: They end up a bum.
S: They end up check-out chicks.
S: There's no other options, just sort of labouring jobs. I don't think people want to do these jobs anymore. Most people are brought up thinking these days that you can do whatever you want to do …
S: No one wants to be a no-hoper bum.
(Victoria Independent Year 10 Students)

Students knowing the ropes

Amongst many of the rural students interviewed, there was a sense that they had accumulated a degree of street-savvy that would allow them to buffer rejections by investigating alternative routes to their desired outcomes. Some students understood that they would need to start at the bottom. What was striking was that they already had a view to the top. Others understood the notion of "backdoor" entry to courses that would allow them to achieve what they wanted in the long-term. Where backdoor entry was unlikely to eventuate, some students were realistic enough to have a second preference ready to pursue rather than give up hope of advancing their prospects.

Students demonstrated that they had already investigated the long-term prospects of the traineeships that they had taken up. Their aspirations were sufficiently focused to emphasise the possibilities of advancement and the way that they could progress to the top:

S: I'm going to do a retail traineeship through Safeway and mid next year I'm going to turn that in to a management course which they are offering and they said I can just progress further. That's what I'll put in to it – that's what I'll get out of it.
(Victoria Year 12 Student)

Likewise, students with aspirations for tertiary studies also demonstrated a street wiseness, particularly where they understood that courses were difficult to get into either because the courses required higher entry scores than they were likely to achieve or because of tight quotas on entry. Many students knew of the articulated pathways between TAFE colleges and Universities that would allow them to start their study at TAFE and progress to a degree programme at a University. Students who intended to access the pathways spoke with confidence that the articulation between institutions would allow them to realise their aspirations. Their confidence was generally justified as those who intended to make use of articulated institutional pathways had usually confirmed the possibilities and knew where they were headed:

S: I'm doing a Certificate IV in photography. And I'm going to get my entrance to University.
I: OK. And have you checked to see the Uni courses that are available?
S: Yeah.
I: Can you tell me why you'll go through TAFE and do a Certificate rather than go straight to Uni?
S: I was in TE and I found it too hard coping with all the subjects and that. And so yeah, there was another option which was to go through TAFE. And it's a one year course and then you go to Uni after that.
(Western Australia Indigenous Student)

In general, students who thought that they would not gain the requisite score to gain direct entry to University sought alternative pathways through TAFE or other forms of education and training. However, students who could gain direct University entrance also spoke about backdoor entries to high-status courses for which they might not be eligible in the first instance. In these cases, students spoke with conviction that their aspirations need not be dampened with a first time refusal of a place. Their aspirations were kept afloat by what they knew of Universities that allowed students to cross-over from one course to another, sometimes dependent upon them demonstrating sufficiently high levels of success in their initial studies:

S: You can usually get in, like with Physio you do Human Movement which is a lot lower. You only have to do that for a year and get a C, which is a Credit, and you can go straight up to Physio after that.

S: Transfer between Uni courses. Yeah.
(New South Wales Year 11 Students)

Students who were aspiring to higher education studies also had sufficient savvy to understand that Universities across the country require different entry scores. Refusal at one University need not mean that students could not pursue their aspirations elsewhere:

S: I want to be a human rights lawyer ... . To do that I think I will be going – not in Melbourne – I'll probably have to travel interstate because the entrance score is too high here.
(Victoria Independent Year 12 Student)

Resilient students generally saw their futures in terms of moving ahead steadily to realise their aspirations. In some cases, this required accepting interim steps that may, or may not, lead to the original goal:

S: If I couldn't do what I wanted in the defence force, then I would go in as something else, do the training for that and then say, "Look I've been here. I want to try this". And either they say yes or no.
I: So you are wiling to take a second choice and then work your way through?
S: Yeah…
(South Australia Year 13 Student)

In the event that their aspirations were completely stymied by institutional entry requirements that they could not meet, many students understood the wisdom of having a backup plan. But having a backup plan did not mean that they would lose sight of their first option. And warnings about the difficulty of achieving their goals did not necessarily dissuade them from trying:

S: Well, when I say to the teachers that I want to go to NIDA it's always, "Oh, you've got to have a backup plan because you know how hard it is to get in to that." That's pretty much the most common thing they'll say back to you. You just have to be set on what you want to do … just be more determined and have a backup plan, but you have to be set on, that's what you want to do, and that's how hard you're going to have to try to get there. You've got to be focussed to get there, even if people do put you down and that.
(New South Wales Independent Year 11 Student)

Conclusions and Implications

In summation, students whose aspirations centred on work and career options represented the dominant voice within the focus groups at every site, at every school visited. As in the illustrative cases presented here, some students vacillated amongst a range of options but, for the most part, students' voices could be characterised as strong and informed and, oftentimes, determined. The students appeared keenly aware of Changing Times talk; and, in fact, their awareness of changing economic and social structures and the need for further education and training was naturalised in student discourse. In general, the students interviewed appeared to have high-level aspirations and expressed considerable transparency of purpose and clarity of vision in relation to their futures. In this respect, most students were quite certain that Year 12 did not signal the end of study; rather, it marked a transition point to further education and training. Evidently, they were well-informed – savvy and street wise – about possible options and potential pathways post-school. Notably, it was the case that most of the students were looking *onward* and, in line with this in many instances, *outward* – away from their rural communities – in order to accommodate and fulfil their aspirations for the future.

The data presented here signals much to take heart in for career advisers and teachers located and working in regional Australian secondary schools – for they are seemingly operating in ways that effectively serve to inform and encourage students. Clearly, career advisers and teachers, as purveyors and facilitators of knowledge and skills, are in a prime position to inform students about Changing Times, and have a responsibility to do so. As such, it is imperative that career advisers and teachers continue to inform students (regional students and their metropolitan counterparts) about changes in social and economic structures and the value of having higher levels of skills and knowledge that will enhance their lives and allow them to compete successfully for work opportunities in the future. So, too, it is essential that career advisers and teachers continue to provide students with information about post-school options and advise them of specific education and training requirements that will assist them in realising their aspirations for their futures. Career advisers and teachers also need to continue to promote the message that Changing Times require students to adopt a positive orientation to life-long learning in order to optimise their chances of flexibility, and successfully, negotiating post-school transitions. More broadly, it is vital that regional schools maintain and expand opportunities for students to widen their life experiences, and to broaden their knowledge of education and training options, by accessing resourcing and visiting locations outside of their own – at times resource-starved – communities. Finally, the question is posed in relation to what role career advisers and teachers might play while living the complex realities of economic and social change in rural communities and simultaneously serving as the providers of knowledge to their students. For these same career advisers socio-political and ethical issues are

raised in advising students given the realisation that while most of the students were looking *onward,* in many instances it was also the case that this equated with looking and moving *outward* – away from their rural communities – in order to accommodate and fulfil their aspirations for the future.

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